What is volunteering?

There is no single legal definition of what volunteering actually is or what types of activity it includes. Amongst the various definitions that may be used there are some common themes - things like choice, non-payment and community benefit.

The National Council for Voluntary Organisations says that volunteering is:

> "Volunteering is someone spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit the environment or someone who they're not closely related to. Volunteering must be a choice freely made by each individual."

Or, from an individual perspective, as expressed by volunteering co-ordinator and writer Ivan Scheier:

> "Volunteering is doing more than you have to, because you want to, in a cause you consider good."

Whatever the definition, there seem to be some common principles fundamental to volunteering:

Choice: Freedom to volunteer also means freedom not to become involved.

Open to everyone: Volunteering should be open to all, no matter what a person's background. Anyone can do good things for others.

Mutual Benefit: Volunteers offer their time unpaid, but they should benefit in other ways, such as gaining a sense of wellbeing, satisfaction or achievement, social contact, enjoyment, learning new skills etc.

Recognition: Recognition of the value of the contribution of volunteers is important. This includes recognising the contribution to the organisation, the community, the social economy and wider social objectives.

Regular volunteering can take many forms, from simple informal acts of kindness to highly structured or specialist roles, across a whole range of sectors including care, health, environment, sport, arts, music, culture/heritage, advice, education and more.

Microvolunteering is one-off, short activities that benefit society or the environment. These activities may take anything from a few seconds up to an hour and could include sharing a charity's campaign material, playing online games that raise cash, crafts such as knitting baby clothes for premature babies, taking part in 'citizen science' such as counting wild birds in your garden.

Employer-supported volunteering is where businesses enable their staff to give time to the community through their workplace. This may be by authorising additional time or granting specific leave for people to volunteer, or group / team tasks, or as 'pro bono' time given by professionally qualified staff to benefit community causes.